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Obituary: Raphael Patai (1910-1996)

Dan Ben-Amos

University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu

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Recommended Citation

Ben-Amos, D. (1997). Obituary: Raphael Patai (1910-1996). *The Journal of American Folklore*, 110 (437), 314-316. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/87

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Abstract

First memories are formative. Raphael Patai, who died on July 20, 1996, opens his autobiography with a memory of himself as an infant sliding down three flights of stairs into the street and placing himself between the two rails of the tramline, only to be saved at the last minute and carried back into the safety of his home by his mother. Whether recalled or reinforced by parental retelling, both aspects of this recollection, the spirit of independent exploration and the protective warmth of home, mark his path in life.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

OBITUARY

RAPHAEL PATAI (1910–1996)

DAN BEN-AMOS
University of Pennsylvania

First memories are formative. Raphael Patai, who died on July 20, 1996, opens his autobiography with a memory of himself as an infant sliding down three flights of stairs into the street and placing himself between the two rails of the tramline, only to be saved at the last minute and carried back into the safety of his home by his mother. Whether recalled or reinforced by parental retelling, both aspects of this recollection, the spirit of independent exploration and the protective warmth of home, mark his path in life.

His father, Jozsef Patai (1882–1953), was a Hungarian and Hebrew poet and editor who until his immigration to Palestine was a leader in the Budapest Jewish community. His mother Edith (1886–1976) was a Hungarian lyrical poet and novelist. Raphael Patai, born on November 22, 1910, grew up in a traditional progressive, intellectual, and urbane atmosphere in interwar Budapest. His father nurtured him with love for learning, literature, and languages and wrapped him with a protective encouragement in which he thrived. His childhood memories include prominent scholars and writers like the Arabist Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) and the folklorist Bernard Heller (1871–1943) (whom he later singled out as the teacher that influenced him most), and the leading Hebrew poets of that time, Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) and Saul Tchernichowsky (1875–1943). Scion to several important rabbinical families, he was steeped in Jewish learning and was himself ordained by the Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest in 1936. At the same time he studied at the University of Budapest, where he was exposed to German language and literature and a broad European education. In spite of his intellectual exhilaration with European literatures, at the university Patai found himself gravitating toward Semitic languages like Arabic and Syriac. These complemented his interest in the Bible and Jewish

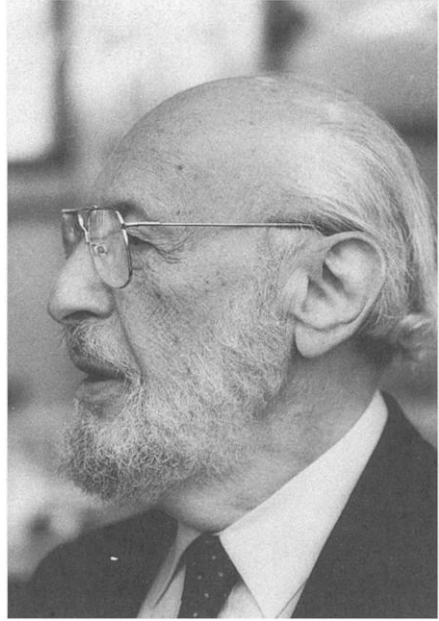


Photo by Daphne Patai © 1993

antiquities. After receiving his doctorate degree from the University of Budapest in 1933, he moved to Palestine (later Israel) and enrolled at the budding Hebrew University, which was founded in 1925. In 1936 he became its first graduate to be awarded the doctorate degree.

Patai's dissertation, for which he won the coveted Tel Aviv municipality Bialik Prize, portends his future intellectual development and adventurous departure from traditional and academic Jewish studies. Its topic, "Water: A Study in Palestinian Geography and Folklore during the Biblical and the Mishnaic Periods," reflects a major concern of the Jewish population in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. The extension of Jewish settlements during that period encountered the perennial dual problem of rainfall shortage and inaccessible underground water reservoirs. Digging wells was a real problem that also became a literary theme. For Patai the economic, social, and cultural preoccupation with water became a subject of scholarly pursuit, and he studied the theme as it

was manifested in traditional life and literature. He surveyed it methodologically in the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash, venturing also beyond their confines into the comparative method of folklore and anthropology. In his analysis he demonstrated existing similarities between Jewish purification rituals and the cosmogenic conception of water and those found in the cultures of African, Asian, and Australian peoples, as well as in European antiquity and peasantry.

In the 1930s, neither folklore nor anthropology were recognized disciplines at the Hebrew University. Anxious to set his foot in the academic door, Patai began his career with a four-year stint of teaching Hebrew to immigrant students. Yet the folklore flame that Bernard Heller ignited in him back in Budapest flared up in Jerusalem. In 1935, before receiving his Hebrew University degree, he had already issued a call in a local daily paper for collecting and recording newcomers' folklore.

In 1944 he repeated this message in a national newspaper for beginning Hebrew readers. His text (Patai 1992:419–421) is highly reminiscent of William Thoms's essay "Folk-Lore," only modified to address local problems of multiple ethnicities, uprooted communities, and contacts between traditions.

This call for collecting, and others like it, were public manifestations of Patai's indefatigable efforts in the cause of folklore. These efforts culminated in the formation of The Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology in 1944 and its outstanding journal *Edoth*, of which three volumes (1945–1947) appeared. During this period Patai established himself as a leading folklorist and anthropologist in Israel, informing international (particularly American) scholars about the significance of folklore and anthropology research there. He published his first article in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1946, and a year later his study "On Cultural Contact and Its Working in Modern Palestine" appeared in the American Anthropological Association Monograph Series.

In retrospect, 1947 was a pivotal year in Patai's scholarly life. He published the first, and to my knowledge the only, introduction to anthropology in Hebrew, a book that demonstrated his unique capacity to synthesize information from diverse sources. The other book that he published that year, his first in

English, *Man and Temple In Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual*, drew the attention of the poet Robert Graves and was the beginning of a life-long friendship and creative collaboration. But most crucially, 1947 was the year that he came to the United States. In spite of the international support for his work, Patai was not able to convince the administration of the Hebrew University to establish departments of either folklore or anthropology, and when the Viking Fund (later the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research) offered him a year-long fellowship in the United States he was happy to accept.

This yearlong visit turned into a permanent residency. Patai joined the faculty of Dropsie College in Philadelphia, where he taught for nine years (1948–1957). In 1956 he became the Director of Research at the Herzl Institute in New York. During this and subsequent periods he held visiting lectureships in anthropology at several leading East Coast universities, including the University of Pennsylvania (1948–1949), Columbia University (1948, 1954–56, 1960–61), the New School for Social Research (1948), New York University (1951–53), and Princeton University (1952–1954). He was also a professor of anthropology at Fairleigh Dickinson University (1966–1976).

Raphael Patai was a prolific writer with few in either folklore or anthropology who could rival his productivity. In his lifetime he wrote over 30 books and edited 13 more. He remained an active scholar until two months before his death, when he succumbed to illness. Still, when he died he left behind manuscripts for two more books that are now being published.

Intellectually, the 1930s and 1940s were his formative years. The encounter with the newly settled Palestine, the diverse Jewish ethnic groups, and the Palestinian Arabs had an intoxicating effect on the young Patai. The subjects and languages that he had studied in Budapest became alive on the streets of Jerusalem. He complemented this experience with voracious reading in comparative folklore and religion and in modern American anthropology. The concepts of culture, cultural contact, and acculturation with which the anthropological writings of that period teemed were not just abstract ideas for him but a tangible reality of daily life. Stepping outside his student apartment, he

would witness storytelling, the speaking of proverbs, and the practice of folk cures among Jews and Arabs alike in the market place, the coffee houses, private homes, and public places.

This intellectual and experiential growth had a lasting impact that unfolded in Patai's future scholarship. His interpretations of Hebrew myths and rituals, the central subject of his folklore research, are a synthesis of comparative, historical, and functional analyses. He sought to uncover the mythical foundations of Judaism that lay beneath the monotheistic veneer of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinical literature. Comparative folklore that drew upon both classical sources and the cultures of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Australia enabled Patai to demonstrate the similarities between Jewish religious beliefs and practices and those of the rest of humanity. The 19th- and 20th-century archaeological discoveries in Syria and Mesopotamia provided him with texts of myth and epics that placed the Hebrew Bible in the context of ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Patai proposed that some figures, most prominently the feminine divine that the medieval Jewish mystics contemplated, are but a metamorphic incarnation of Canaanite goddesses. The basic tenor of his argument was not completely new at the time. Archaeologists and biblical scholars on the one hand and the myth and ritual scholars in England on the other had edged toward similar conclusions, but Patai's familiarity with the Hebrew Bible and its midrashic and rabbinical interpretations, and with comparative folklore, articulated these ideas in a synthesis that had a depth and breadth that others could hardly match.

Patai's encounter with the modern Middle East had a decisive influence on his anthropological research as well. He perceived these societies and formulated his thoughts about them in a binary modality of contacts between oppositions, and then pondered their subsequent outcomes. For him the eastern Mediterranean shores were a place where East and West, past and present, met, and where Arabs and Jews locked in conflict. He conceived of this cultural situation not just in terms of its immediate political and social repercussions, which were as severe then as they are now, but from a perspective that history could offer. Not a fieldworker so much as a library scholar, he harnessed his profound knowledge of Islamic and Jewish sources and his general erudition to construct

the Arab and the Jewish minds as products and shapers of two respective civilizations, following the "culture and personality" model in anthropology.

Similarly, he observed and analyzed the North African and Asian Jews who immigrated en masse to Israel in the 1950s, at their point of contact with the modern Israelis. While Patai was inquisitive about their traditional cultures, it was their contact with the West that interested him most. The westernization of the Orient and the orientalizing of the West in culture, art, and folklore rendered him spellbound. The two books on which he worked last were about Arab folktales and on the crypto Jews of Meshhed, Iran, in which he explored a tragic chapter in the history of Iranian Jewry that involves interfaith relations.

The fascination with cultures in contact did not obscure for Patai the significance of studying ancient Jewish communities in their own historical habitat. Earlier, through the Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology and its journal *Edoth*, and later through the Jewish Folklore and Anthropology Series that he founded at the Wayne State University Press, he encouraged the publication of precisely such studies that elucidate chapters in the folklore and traditions of Jewish societies.

Patai was an independent scholar. The academic world was not hospitable to him either in Israel or in the United States, but by the same measure it did not impose on him its disciplinary structure. Patai wrote about Jews and Arabs, about past and present cultures; he wrote as a folklorist, anthropologist, historian, and mythologist. Often a maverick, he introduced folklore and anthropology to Jewish studies before this field was ready for them, and he explored in-depth feminine deities before the rise of feminism. His partner in the study of myth was an English poet living in Majorca, and Patai himself was a citizen of two worlds, perhaps more. Denied the forum of an academic cathedral, Patai did not address in his writings a group of faithful disciples. So he made the world his audience, thereby turning all of us into his students.

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